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Professor 'erred' on CIA funds

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A Harvard dean said yesterday that a professor improperly handled a \$45,700 grant from the Central Intelligence Agency to sponsor a conference next week on Islamic fundamentalism and ordered him to disclose the nature of the conference's sponsorship to all of its participants.

In a curt and unusually swift resolution of its investigation into the propriety of the CIA funding, A. Michael Spence, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, said Professor Nadav Safran failed to go through proper university channels.

While permitting Safran, the director of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, to hold the conference, he said Safran "erred" in initially failing to report the grant. Safran had at first held that the grant was to him directly.

"Although it is he who received funds from the sponsors, the conference utilizes the university's name and facilities," Spence said in a statement issued last night. "Therefore I take the view that the funds are in fact a grant to the institution and that our normal policies apply."

Those policies require professors to report outside grants to their faculty deans, to accept only those grants that can be publicly disclosed and, in some cases, to share half to two-thirds of the grant money with the university. Harvard guidelines prohibit secret or classified research.

By ruling that the CIA money was a grant to the university, rather than to Safran as an individual contractor, Spence implied that Safran would have to share the grant with Harvard.

The closed two-day conference, "Islam and Politics in the Contemporary Muslim World," was expected to draw some 90 scholars from this country and the Middle East.

According to Spence's statement, he did not know of the conference or its sponsorship until he received a letter from Safran on Oct. 2. Spence said that he became concerned that the conference's "manner of sponsorship - \$45,700 through a personal contract with the CIA, which he would in turn pass on to the CMES - might conflict with several important university policies."

Spence said, "Professor Safran said that his reason for structuring the funding as he did was to avoid what he believed were excessive costs associated with flowing the funds through proper channels. ... I have concluded that Professor Safran erred in not following the relevant rules in regard to sponsored projects and research."

Contacted at home last night, Safran said, "I erred. I regret it. It happened out of an excessive zeal to do something intellectually stimulating and terribly important."

Safran acknowledged that the report was "a reprimand of sorts," but said it was "very low key" and turned on the issue of procedure rather than any implications that he sought to conceal his relationship with the CIA or to benefit financially by not reporting the grant to Harvard earlier.